

THE IOWA POETRY PRIZE



THE *Oval* HOUR

*Poems by Kathleen Peirce*

# *The Oval Hour*

*Winner of the Iowa Poetry Prize*

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# *The Oval Hour*

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FOR LOUISE FRANCES PEIRCE



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# *The Oval Hour*



## *Ovidian*

Who stares into a wood and sees a dress fastened to a tree  
recalls the torso of a man with arms held up among the wrens  
and desires the man. Who moves among desires understands  
stasis is the harder art. What feels like one is often two,  
as how eyes look, or more than two, as how sunset opposes  
noon, or how desire abides in memory, roving where  
a girl in woods unfastens her sundress, a tree suspends  
a flock, wrens flutter in a girl, a torso gently aches  
inside a tree. The eye wants something other than it sees,  
and what it sees. A hem lifts in the leaves.



## *Nearness and Entrance*

Days and nights of the most and largest changes  
in her tenth year. Absolute time had always been near,  
but in that year it entered her seemingly  
by letting go either end. Why would a child think  
of what she was before?

During the days, place stayed constant, house  
of her whole life, where she knew every thing  
in every drawer and cupboard. Why wonder  
what anything becomes?

The days made room according to the light.  
She would be on a cot in the breezeway, her body  
on the body of the cot, in the body of the breezeway,  
being and not waiting.

It was a green meshwork as much as the woods were,  
or the cottonwood letting fly its fairy princesses.  
Some thing would be in her hand, the white but scratched  
skin of the birch she'd peeled, or ruffles from the overblown  
peony. She knew fragrance as a kind of voice.

Nights were bodiless. Crickets turned from form and were  
their sounds. Think of her turning off the bathroom light  
to hurry the feeling on, happy to make the tub unknowable  
through whiteness, happy that water can become its farther  
part, removed from clarity and sparkling.

She is of a size that can float there. But  
when she opens her body and slides forward, time enters  
in a vibrancy and changes her, and leaves her this  
pleasure now, later desire.

## *Confession 1.8.13*

Passing through innocence, I came either to experience  
or guilt, or they came to me, displacing innocence,  
which didn't leave (where would it have gone),  
and yet it was no more. I was no longer  
an unmarked girl but a woman gesturing.  
It was not that the world showed itself to me  
in a set method. Longing in stillnesses  
and various tendencies of thought, I thought to be touched  
by the world as it willed, or by whoever knew me.  
I did myself, by the understandings objects gave me,  
practice this touching, this being touched.  
When things said themselves, and saying, sang,  
I listened and imagined they themselves were presences  
of stillnesses and movements, a music visible.  
That they meant themselves and no others was plain  
from shapes they took as leaves or men or rain. And so  
by my constant thoughts on shapes as they appeared,  
I collected what they stood for, and having broken in  
my body to these signs, I gave gestures of opening to it.

## *Nude against the Light*

You for whom the day was sad, among you  
there were some whose days are never  
otherwise. Among them, there were very few  
whose presence shone despair so violent  
we hated them. They said  
the angels at the feeder are dying as they sing,  
they said a painting demonstrates failure to see  
the portion of a woman not created with brush strokes,  
regardless of the brightness of the room. The room  
is bright. So much so that, broken down, the light,  
having passed through lace, cut there  
by the order of a loveliness particular  
and rare, magnifies the objects of the room,  
brings them to supplication, to being as a rendering  
of surfaces the eye is helpless to resist, there being  
so much pleasure in that place. The figure's nakedness is drawn  
to be included as a surface but resists, as she is other than  
a wovenness, a carved thing, painted thing. She was not  
made by hand. Neither is she only made of how or where  
she looks, as sunshine seems to be. She  
regards herself. Or she's diffused, already entered  
the seizure of daylight on coverlet and wall, taken by a heaven  
of negligible outlines. If this is so, the figure separate from light  
must be our memory of her. She was so sad, who found each pleasure  
better than herself, and irresistible.

*Confession 10.8.13*

Collect and recollect. These things I do  
within, where, present with me is the world  
and whatever I could think of it,  
and what I have forgotten. Some things  
I buried, though they seemed self-buried,  
or slipped out of my mind when they had  
glided further into me as I believed  
them gone. Once my mouth had been aroused  
by the side of a man's thumb moving over it,  
the image fixed in me by that impress  
recalls the hand, or my heightening,  
as if I know my lover when I have him,  
or when I have no one. In this way  
my mind contains my body and can keep  
in mind delight, whether I revisit with the  
pleasure of my body, or I revisit thinking  
my sad thoughts, or I keep back my desire  
like the broken animals.

### *Confession 4.2.3*

In hope of loving what is real  
and in hope of being loved  
by something real, believing that my mind  
is intermingled with what is done by me,  
what is the seeing of a snake in the rope  
except hallucination, and what else is the seeing  
of a deer on the path when there is  
no deer there? When I feel the wind  
with thinking and longing, am I the pleasure  
of nothing? I have not seen a vivid wind,  
and trying caused my eyes to close  
and I saw nothing, no differently  
than when I fall asleep. Mornings I know  
the mirror that reflects my face  
reflected first its maker as all mirrors do,  
and returns me a reversal of myself.  
How will I recognize the secret shapes  
of my accompaniment, and what word would I say?

*Confession 1.13.20*

You who were perfectly simple and true  
as we were simple and true (except that we were  
flesh, and the breaths that left us passed  
and never came again), you who didn't change,  
you who never deceived, waking or dreaming,  
while we slept and woke beside a trellis of clematis  
shaking with the implications of mannered withering,  
or woke beside a river that had killed itself for love,  
you pure sign among the beautiful women,  
you who hung the same between sisters  
as between the mothers and girls,  
you, dressed as the cleft between the letters  
of any written word, visible and blank and absolute,  
the final wave, the mouthed word from the eldest daughters  
boarding trains for modeling school  
forced a weary, historic sadness to emerge.  
When we asked, the less learned among us answered  
they did not know you; the more learned never did.

## *Pygmalion in March*

This world is not human. In my loneliness the spirea  
kept close to the house while the distances took white.  
Tender and supple, dead looking, by resemblance it coaxed me  
to imagine the tops of the catalpa and the oak  
where no hands go, where god is.  
When the last snow fell with rain and disappeared,  
pricking the white field so the mud broke through,  
I kept sitting at the window.  
Forked, sparrow colored, crossing and recrossing,  
the spirea showed me how a shape can't help but touch itself.  
Then I knew god to be a shapelessness  
overseeing form. When even the smallest twigs began  
distending smallest ivory buds, it was then I remembered  
memory and saw the shrub as it was going to be,  
heavy with the dusty-smelling white flesh of itself. Briefly,  
briefly, the shape and the idea of the shape filled the image full.  
Like a god, against my disappearing, I invented her.

## *Evening Poem*

If the coronal suture of the young deer's skull  
is the smallest trough for listening for death, it begins

or ends, weak or tentative, behind the eye and equals  
or approximates the wavy track a mole delineates

along a cemetery fence at dusk. *Going home*, we think.  
The maddening or ecstatic thinness of such lines

delights and mortifies those talking there, who see each other  
oddly banked by mounds of plastic flowers, and further,

deeper, amid lovers who made, finally, families in shrouds.  
She thought to bring a candle. He thinks to whorl

its changeful surface with his singular fingertip, or he does it  
without thinking. Would that he could imprint,

as on a correspondence fixed with sealing wax, only  
love's evidence, labyrinth, and alphabet.



## *Two Sisters*

There they are before desire went to them,  
one preferring spring, when the smaller shapes  
seem really willing to be seen, one preferring fall  
for the yellow heaviness dragging over over-ripeness,  
opening it before it leaves. These two are children.  
One knows to sleep on top the other, fitting her cheek  
against her thigh with a turned-out head,  
knees hooked over the farther thigh, a ladle and tureen.  
From her shoulders to her hips the smaller body crosses  
her sister's open legs. The larger one has looked  
at how she's crossed to magnify the feeling, and she'll  
look again. She loves the spring. Her sister floats under  
the arm draped over her and the cupped hand roving  
her sleepy sleepy head where something opens and  
divides and illustrates, divides and wants reverberation,  
wants the floaty feeling after being touched by form,  
then formlessness. She loves the fall.

## *Figure with Trees*

One shoulder breaking the tension of a satin slip,  
making the strap fall loose inside the dress.  
Bend of the gesture sliding the strap back, into place,  
one frond of the mimosa.

Something hurts her. Or, head bent, she's sleeping  
sitting up. Heavy beauty in the curved, lax hands,  
two gold bracelets crossed. But her knees have fallen  
open under the stitched cloth, and her mouth has. Red  
edge of one ear, red five-petaled hand. The one shoulder  
brought outside the bodice of the dress.

Wind is a kind of looking, different in a cedar  
than a sycamore. Hundreds of cedar on this hill. Rare sycamore,  
common wind. Four pretty mimosa.  
Her human shoulder moving when she breathes.

## *Thimble Forest*

Finite, the emplacement of eight thimbles  
on eight upright pins. Then the shutting of the lid  
forever over them. The eye-hole was merciful,  
but the human hand shakes so, bringing pleasure on,  
that the thimbles quivered with me when I looked in at them,  
but when none fell I didn't want to be their leitmotif  
and I removed myself as if immortal,  
but having seen, I feel them waiting to be seen.

## *Mirror Forest*

Vertical junipers whose heads pitch  
out of reach. A blue sky, then a black sky  
never or always touching them. Love makes for itself  
precarious foundations. Like wind moves,  
I feel you moving over me, while the trees appear  
moved through. I understand that to look into a mirror  
is not to enter it. I saw the way the one tree leaning over moving water  
moved like water, I saw the surfaces refracting like my words.

## *Seahorse Forest*

Armless, legless, clinging to. How I have been  
required to still myself with the filigree  
I am made of. I had held one frond near ground  
until I thought the frond resembled me.  
Then I was visited, and though my other  
rarely faces me, I sensed we were equine  
and rare, small to view among the fathoms  
but unbroken, perpetual, and our own.

*Confession 2.5.10*

What is the joy of the moral heart  
if the great secret of morals is love,  
if my heart, trying its nature,  
makes a mirror of itself  
for a body not my own,  
if my heart is returned to me  
as a body of water will return a face  
without sensing its accomplishment, water  
so different in the final armslength  
of daylight, seeming to soften as it darkens  
but really only darkening after all, and even then  
my mirror bent over the evening water,  
the voice of objects saying *love what*  
*refuses you* and the voice of heaven saying  
*praise your correspondence with all things*  
*beautiful there below*, and my own voice  
assigned to ask *O behold my heart*.

## *Jessamine*

The morning is dark and wet as if darkness and wetness  
had been done to it, had undone the common chipperness  
of what there had been to expect. Shall we be relieved?  
Not only is the little yellow flower softer for it,  
it lasts longer, and water moves slantwise off and on between,  
and because between, among all outside things. Why shouldn't I  
want to think of wine asleep in casks with my eyes closed?  
Wasn't this always with me, the serene pause in things  
held back from touch? How is it the weather feels  
to have turned from what things want?  
What should I let inscribe itself onto me as you do,  
who love me all you can and not enough?

## *Of the Veritable Ocean*

There was no sea for her to sing beyond the genius of,  
but she had heard of it, and knew a version  
where a blue, a grey, a foam moved, very grand  
between two horizontal stillnesses, not toward,  
or for, or of her, she who was too small  
to go outside alone. Nor was it actual  
sea, but seawater adhering to a gulf. Between her body  
and the water were trees where someone had attached so many  
oranges. Why, and how?

There never was a sea, but in time there was a view,  
a hill she learned to listen from, and she seemed most moved  
by other people talking. One said *the caves I carve with my mass  
echo some great songs I do not recognize*. This was spoken  
as a lake of tears would speak. Another said *you want me more  
than I want you*. One sobbed forth a sentence that he knew  
would instigate his vanishing against his will. There was  
no sea, but after certain sentences some silences  
were like the genius of a place she could become

if not a song, an open mouth followed by swallowing,  
self-aroused as waves seem self-aroused without the presence of  
a moon, or like fragrance increasing with a rose's helplessness.  
This was her strength. There was no sea. Its absence  
meant the world to her, as she was not



required to sing, nor did she claim a listener.  
She required a world, or a version of a world  
intense enough to overwhelm in times when  
not much happens, where an orange is orange, and  
full with being touched by other waters.

## *Grief*

The same woman passes on my sidewalk.  
She leaves me every day.  
Here is her walking stick with bells strapped on,  
odd in a plain way, the safest simplest things  
strange merely by their happening at once,  
as through a neighbor's window a lace is seen  
occurring on a horsehair davenport. Or one detached  
white flower in the yard, trumpet shaped, enough for one hand,  
an exquisite drinking thing made of cup and mouth,  
what love is until you look away, until you see a whole catalpa tree  
heaving off these flowers by the thousands, meaning grief.

## *Mother and Son*

When his arms raise it's all he knows of how  
a body opens. Light and full,  
his body in the moment just before she touches him  
knows to meet and fill the contours of the day, so that her  
hands, cupping his sides, duplicate his sides  
to make him twice contained. He is not less  
when she lets go because the day receives him  
with brief obedience in ways too various to count,  
if he could count; daylight rakes the barrier  
she's put him on, a cemetery wall, with striped giddiness.  
Cars passing make the darker stripes, and stripes of sound.  
He can't tell if he finds things or they come to him.  
If he looks farther on, the narrowing wall seems pulled out of itself,  
so he looks where he stands. Pebbles make the wall's top  
lion colored. Pale upright stones align in the interior,  
a field for the greater presences: calm blue hydrangea,  
angel with made hands, wings, and face held out,  
stuck in radiance. These worlds are shapely and occasional  
as she is now, who lifts him down.

## *Confession 12.6.6*

In my village (*comus*) there is a song (*oda*),  
a comedy no one remembers the inception of,  
though our elderly weep, remembering  
the diminished voices of their elders  
growing in weakness, serenading them,  
whose voices are diminished now.  
Our song is matter without form  
set into our children, an almost-nothing,  
like the filament the spider fastens to the branch  
that sets a leaf to twirl rather than fall;  
we sing with thought, but not the *is, is-not*  
which is thought's origin. When we sing, we cease to be  
what we have been, and begin to be what we were not,  
whether we sing while acting out the obligations  
of our days, or, with devotion, sing  
to the lovers in our beds, for we began in hell.  
Our song (*oda*) is of the goats (*tragus*).  
We sing to praise our will to murder them.

## *Red*

Reason in the hummingbird feeder:  
it's what they're drawn to. They themselves  
shall not be red but some have red, banded  
at the throat and only in some light.  
Their lives are beautiful  
but their endings sad; their lives are sad  
but their endings beautiful.  
Some days it appears that things are stilled  
in a cascade of possibilities, and it seems  
important that the table not be moved  
any farther into the body of the room, as when  
lying on the floor just looking at its underside  
was more appropriate when you were a child,  
and that the low, wide, flat, black bowl stay empty  
except for the false chase of fishes stamped into its rim,  
and that the bowl be at the center of the table. Unless  
you were really thinking of it, it would not occur  
that the rim could have been said to be a lip.

## *Wren*

The house wren had more beauty on a sad day.  
Someone thought of himself as sitting without thinking.  
He would have said neither was there feeling.  
The feeder hung where he'd hung it,  
and he'd filled it. Why be ashamed?  
Moments that seemed not to make the morning  
crossed the morning and he wondered  
what he'd had before that thought occurred to him.  
Less? A making ready? Why would his mind  
make arrangements toward a desire he didn't know?  
The painted bird sprang down and ate,  
random and consequential.

## *Confession 7.5.7*

And when I asked where evil is  
sometimes I asked in evil ways  
and so was blinded to the evil  
in my search. When what is particular  
seemed small (the fuchsia zinnia,  
dog's tooth, rain, a man asking me  
to look away from him) I was corrupted  
by belief that she who asks to be increased  
is made safe by the courage of her question.  
But when I recognized (by my revisiting)  
the meeting place of the particular  
and the immense, evil was strange to me,  
the colors of the flowers vast,  
the dog's tooth more wet than the rain,  
and I became obedient, and looked away,  
against no one, having learned to fear  
my will (overequipped for measurement),  
and came to love what kept itself from me.

## *Expulsion and Annunciation*

Holding the fruit against her ribs, she looks despondent.  
He isn't touching her. Let's untie that twine of her fingers  
from the model of charity. We have the chirp  
of crickets in December in the South. Do you think  
or is there a ceiling under which the heavens roll?  
Above the depth and breadth and height of her desire  
there was only more desire, his three fingers  
and her body moving on them. Here and now, it's only  
thinking moving on thought, trill and chirp  
into which enters one dog's ecstatic, cone-shaped  
bark, like thought put into you.



## *Dyke Breach*

Anything in the extreme.  
Oh how different difference is,  
how resistant to easiness, wordplay, and everyday-  
ness. How unlike everything everything is when we are  
there. Field of poppies to the left of the road.  
Put there, but that hardly matters. Did the packages  
of seed say red? Pure red, pure joy? Rapture  
is a word not with us anymore but hysteria is.  
Break me down says the extreme thing,  
laughing and sobbing. The third pure poppy is a red  
unlike the second, unlike the first. The field,  
the field, the field is more than everything,  
us out of the car now, another painter getting the paintbrush  
away from himself, flinging it or ignoring it, reaching  
for the spatula and red, putting it there, which means  
everything finally, smearing it, the two figures  
red where they stand, intense (in tension) (intention),  
making us want to bring our bodies there. It's for  
afterwards, it's all for the look-away,  
the whatever-it-is we see we have after.

*Confession 11.19.25*

God to whom nothing new will come,  
I am a bonnet covering a rose,  
and at my end I will be completely world,  
or I am a drum with death inside,  
waiting for a mandolin. My son  
is a parrot carrying a ladder  
to his future where a woman in a boat  
smiles from among her hundred flowers,  
or he is a soldier with a vase inside,  
waiting for a spider. You for whom sensation  
is perceivable, oversee the making of his  
sexual bed, his dream bed, death bed.  
Induce his unfolding, imperceptible to you,  
imperceptible to you to whom nothing  
new will come, while I continue singing  
of the realm of things he might believe  
in a world of arriving and vanishing.

## *Butterfly House*

From the foyer, the corner of the waterfall fell  
behind the portion of the glass wall that contained it.  
We could see parts, and we could only see.  
The day was in there, irreducible even though  
made to come into a box of glass. Of the giant fronds  
and leaves and stems and blooms, none needed us.  
We were withheld, outside but not outdoors.  
Did the moment's indentation come bulging  
out at us or were we pressing in, what with  
us and the grand room dense with such interiors,  
and which was more accompanied, more occupied  
by that pair whose outsized wings kept them at our height,  
or were they only heavy or giddy about how alike they were  
and are, azure number one and azure number two,  
hemmed with black, accentuated, operatic really  
in their mutual intent to play the beloved's voyeur  
until death and in midair, though what's midair  
under a roof? Ours was an emergency in the most  
emergent sense, some words floating out from the head  
of one of us toward the other's head and in,  
in slow-time, then the other's turn,  
ruminating on perfection in eternity.

## *Confession 9.4.10*

None live without death,  
but I have believed along with those  
who believe in dying in one's sleep,  
as if sleep is a cutaway of presence where  
loss can be felt less, as though I had forgotten  
vividness called forward in my sleep (flowers  
too red, the stairwell narrowing),  
or I had not watched, excluded and enamored,  
the sleep of those I love. Given my body,  
either I live slow of heart and have the world  
magnified and exterior to me, and lick the shadows  
of things seen and the temporal, or I live  
to receive and rehearse vividness,  
inwardly kissed by the eternal internal of  
everything, or I pretend to be untouched  
and whole and satiate, forgetting that sweetness which  
is ripeness also is decay, and in each way come to know  
death, and am furious with death.

## *Dreaming All Night*

A man goes walking away from his house,  
down a long road in the rain. It feels  
wonderful to him. Down and down he walks and comes to  
a creek and he stops, watching the water move fast  
then faster in front of him, and the creek widens  
and hurries more, and widens, and he steps back  
and is amazed. A boat floats by. Just as he sees it  
he reaches out and grabs the lanyard and he pulls it in.  
He gets in and lies down, and the rain is  
dropping on his face, and the boat is moving in the current of  
the water, and when he looks the sky is moving, too. This lasts  
so long the boat fills up with water, which he doesn't realize  
until the water starts getting in his mouth. He sits up.  
The creek that was a stream is now a lake, and widening, but the boat  
bumps into land, and he gets out. He walks onto an island,  
and above him are leaves of every green dripping and dripping. He  
walks by flowers, all kinds of flowers of all colors closed up  
waiting for the sun. He walks by. The rain is lessening. The grade  
of the path he walks on is getting steeper, but so gradually that he  
barely recognizes it. The overgrowth ends and he steps out of it  
and things have changed. The rain has stopped, and before him  
in the distance is his house. He walks there, walks inside, and there  
are his wife and child at the table, eating supper. She looks at his  
shoes and he does, too. Look at that mud, she says, but he sees  
gold. It's gold, he says. Look. Where have you been, she wants to know.  
I was walking. Look at you, she says.

*Confession 3.10.18*

Of the times I felt myself an ornament  
of the world, it was always with the clarity  
of my body moving over a larger body,  
brought to move as a bracelet rolls upward on the arm  
when the hand, without consciousness,  
is lifted to the eye or mouth, or as a bracelet falls  
to its limit when the arm swings down,  
the wearer made aware, pleased by having been so  
added to. But if the world had been aware of me,  
and had been given pleasure by my moving over it,  
I would have known, the way a lover knows the other's arm  
as an adornment greater than the silver at its wrist,  
and the rock that generates a stone daylight can pass through  
would have been obvious to me, and the memory of flowers  
exhaled by the interior of the fig would have been as the aperture  
a child's body, a man's body could pass through,  
and I would have asked for equal mercy  
for myself and fragrances.

## *The Dead*

Might they really want to let go of giving back?  
Let's not let them, who do they think  
they are. Before the first death,  
there was a horse even a child could see  
grazing in an important way among  
the headstones. It was the white color of rescue,  
and it was hungry. Also there was a nut-sized  
piece of brown stained glass with milk in it  
broken from the mausoleum door.  
Even a child would remember the air  
coming out that hole as an abstraction.  
If that dreamy heavy horse and that dry air  
were not hers, she knew they wanted to be  
thought of anyway. They stay awake in her.

## *Promesa*

He will not take fire in his hands  
because his hands are fire. When  
he prays, sudden birdsong  
transmogrifies the bladed places  
fire makes of itself into an expectation  
for retort. All failures move this way,  
though one is left with, if alone, a sight  
for images. Songbird on a brown-  
black branch among the ochre-  
charcoal atmospheres. Burnt sienna,  
pitch. Tan and jet. Sparrow, for whom  
do you sing other than your likenesses?



## *Homage to the Romantic Ballet*

From the pyracantha in November, fire-berries hang  
and burn. The inference that abundance weighs one down  
is a thought made by fearing, though the branch's orange-red  
bedecking

signals it. Please, could we realize today that our thinking is ascribed,  
as the median grasses realize themselves as pinkish brown,  
formerly beautiful in green, but less beautiful before today. It may be  
we have these thoughts because we love each other,  
striking continually as we do against and into present time,  
one prevailing wind countering another with a branch in between,  
or an unobstructed breeze overtaken by a gust,  
a whiff rolled over by a puff, or a simple sigh let go  
across another's lower back with only the involuntary tensing  
of a muscle in response. How unused we are  
to sensing proof that being helplessly extends itself,  
except for the awareness of continuous desire.

The room containing the first sleep of love  
is cold, and waves are heard arriving constantly,  
leaving shells outside to recognize as wings or bones,  
and fish bones that resemble feathers. It is the duty of all lovers  
to forecast the pearly cadences of every inner thing, even though  
the beach describes the apprehension every woman ages with,  
that the supreme interior requires vanishing.

Sentences wave; waves bear and set the mollusks down;  
one arranges to be lived in by another.

## *Thought Might Nod in Waves*

The gentle, curvy tendrils of wisteria won't  
make leaves until I tie them to the post.  
What's waiting worth? Thinking can live there:  
smoke in the mind before the cigarette's lit,  
thought of wetness making wet  
or not; thought might nod in waves  
unattached, unattached, as with the half-fear  
in reading so often how he hurts her,  
how she hurts him, seeing it on a screen,  
light opening a room with no one in it  
yet. So, when the half-pink, papery, spent body  
of the bougainvillea flower was let go and hit me  
I was made ready and knew to make my fear noise.

## *Edenic*

Fire, but a fire barely discernible  
from the blue atmosphere containing it,  
held not by a rendering of will alone,  
or desire alone, but a desire comprised of will  
embedded in an ecstasy just able to contain itself.  
Fire as god, blue atmosphere as fear of god.  
Fire as body, blue the benevolence  
required to sustain it. One clothed, the other undressed.  
Each wondering this far and no further? Words form,  
part of the snake ever in the mouth. One says to the other  
can I kiss you there. Time passes, parts pass across  
parts. Yes or no, both wonder. Then and afterward.

## *Pietà*

In the place of death and so as not to die of the other's death,  
there is a place of wakefulness where shapes take shape  
according to light brightening, passing colors out,  
a place of sleep according to light darkening,  
retrieving them, a place of death where the faintest exhalation  
holds interiors and atmospheres and the gladiolus  
opens in succession from the inmost out.

I am without my other, imagining the beautiful  
as objects will me to. You, new voice opening near at hand,  
will you, if I will, speak until my own death comes?

## *Confession II.II.I3*

Because I cannot understand how things are made,  
I seek to be perfected, to watch myself being made,  
fluttering between the motions  
of things past and to come, as if presence  
is not possible in present time  
except between the hands of *was* and *going to be*,  
and not like between hands, but like between  
the motions of the hands. My first food was the body  
of my mother, and though I have no memory  
of eating there, should I believe that her movements  
have lasted me? Or when a man brings to my mouth  
food he has prepared for me, should I resist  
the understanding of the uninvented future offering?  
A long time becomes long by motions passing by. Eternity  
is still. What should being be?  
What have the bodies of the others to do with me?  
What did my hand do? What did my mouth  
bring about? What will it bring about?

*Confession 11.23.29*

My mouth brings loss to me  
as it takes measurement of being,  
as I think how far, how deep,  
how many, how much more,  
drawing sentience in always as a double inhalation  
of the known and what there might be to expect.  
A mirror pressed against a mirror makes  
a locked infinity, a bliss ruined by entering,  
an anti-kiss. When my mouth opens  
against another human mouth,  
I measure whirlings of an object on a wheel  
which stops (whether or not I pause,  
or if I am slow, or quick with love, or twice as quick).  
And then I speak of time, and time,  
and times, and times, and come to know  
loss, so vehemently kindled toward  
love, and the mouth of love  
which draws away from me.

## *Person, Place, Gesture, Thing*

1

Woman with a book unopened.  
Place where the bleeding heart bloomed last year.  
Her lighting a cigarette making him hard.  
Stair step to trip on.

Man singing in his mind only.  
Room closed on two asleep.  
Heavy picture pulling on the nail.  
Fork in a drawer.

2

His beautiful body, his brother's suicide.  
Dark in one room, dark in the next.  
Her laugh unwinding with the horse's whinnying.  
Pinecones that crackle as if to each other.

Her face in the dream, the sumac reddening.  
Under the bed, above the bed, under the house, above.  
Staining the garment, staining the whole life.  
Whole body of time.

Woman with a book unopened.  
Man singing in his mind only.  
His beautiful body, his brother's suicide.  
Her face in the dream, the sumac reddening.

Place where the bleeding heart bloomed last year.  
Room closed on two asleep.  
Dark in one room, dark in the next.  
Under the bed, above the bed, under the house, above.

Her lighting a cigarette making him hard.  
Heavy picture pulling on the nail.  
Her laugh unwinding with the horse's whinnying.  
Staining the garment, staining the whole life.

Stair step to trip on.  
Fork in a drawer.  
Pinecones that crackle as if to each other.  
Whole body of time.



## *Five-Part Question*

I saw the upholstery guard clamped on the back  
of the seat in front of me.

I saw my own body the usual way, frontal  
and from the chest down, facing the empty chair.

I saw three moving pictures: one out the window,  
one the window itself, and one the whole car rocking.  
The scene outside moved through the moving window,  
and the window moved inside the train,  
but the train moved by itself.

I saw thinking hiccup from an actual memory  
of a true train to a thing I'd only thought about:  
tunnel vision. Thank god it wasn't in the world outside.  
It was in the aisle of the train.

I saw its inhabitant. It was you, honey, *and* your body.  
O delicate and curious, can you guess what I remember  
that I thought I dreamed you want?

## *Round*

Half-light under the vaulted dome of the gymnasium.  
The group moves ovally. In this weather,  
both light and dark are true. The eye  
sees or not, the mind praised less  
by less illuminated things. The bodies make  
and keep a time, but separately, as a thought contained  
and not contained.

What can come in, in this hour  
with and without light? Two keep circling,  
offering their backs. One is multiple,  
a clot of soldiers in green-brown synchronicity,  
and a woman keeping strange time, jogging while she braids  
and unbraids her brown hair. Beauty is repulsive if  
it's touched too much, but in this light, this loss of light,  
each is met by equal portions of its opposite;  
fingers crabbing through her blowzy hair are somehow  
sweetened by her gait, sweetly pigeon-toed.

Her waiting boy,  
so bored with his body, five years old, so bored with the room,  
bored with the raw trees circling the day,  
meets with revelation: a simple seeing  
of the wall clock: five till four. He can tell,  
finally, time. His knowing feels to have been  
waiting all along. Now the bodies pass, and cross  
his thought. Sound the feet make. Feel  
of the clock. His sound everybody's sound.

## *A Trade*

If the geranium could lay hold of  
one moment of sensation as though holding one  
memory of a prior morning  
with a friend licking rainwater from its red face,

someone could be simple and vivid  
and miraculously draw the small and  
deeper beauties upward to compose a face  
enough to ask the other come.

## *Divided Touch, Divided Color*

—*Georges Seurat*

As soon as I walked out I felt the mistake in the weather,  
how the lesser light on the droplets hanging and flying  
off the yew's bough had fooled me into readiness  
for a chill. It was a Tuesday. I'd made my note on the yew berries,  
how beautifully distinct from green they are, even in minimal light.  
What satisfying clusters! Seeing one, one seeks another,  
and the tree responds easily in particles nearly rational,  
or rationally assigned: the range of blues grouped beneath a smaller  
range  
of grays, and then one sees the tree. Forgive me. I hesitate to tell  
how frightened my little walk made me. It was a Tuesday,  
the day my father comes. I wore the scarf and gloves.  
In the graveyard I feel calmer, but the oaks had been changed, opened,  
emptied since the last time by one rain. I saw they had become a line  
of cries,  
and felt them filling me before my mind could think. Then the crow  
flocks  
circled and fell in, binding every opening along the topmost edge  
in a shrieking charcoal line, a line trying to enclose a shape and failing,  
making the eye curl around. Someone, thinking of snow, had placed  
a toy  
on every child's grave. That night, Signac came for dinner, shocked  
by father juggling the knives, one of which he screws into the false end  
of his arm. In my plate I see a painting of a plate. In my wife,  
a jar of powder. My father is a black line eating snow.

*Confession 9.10.25*

What would grief be softened by  
except the company of newer loss,  
what can the body do but enter  
and be entered, if not by the mouth  
of love, by words from mouths that made  
love possible, or by the memory of words.  
What's spoken stops. No body can be entered  
without stopping, but thoughts on voices want  
that. Shhh, he said, holding down my arm  
so he could brush the wrist again. If  
the flesh is hushed, memory ravishes,  
stands under loss, stupefied by understanding,  
marries absence to desire, both being outside of time,  
and makes a riddle of similitude. Behold the corpses  
carried to the burials. That page is blank.  
What was said into me and done with me  
I stay held for, as when the honeyed bodies  
overtook the rooms.

## *First Lines*

He opens her. She can't have him.  
She can't have him but he opens her.  
He opens her because she can't have him.  
She can't have him until he opens her.  
He opens her until she can't have him.  
She can't have him while he opens her.  
He opens her, regretful she can't have him.  
She can't have him regretful when he opens her.

## *Riddles*

He opens her. She can't have him.  
Day following night.  
She can't have him but he opens her.  
Clay and water.  
He opens her because she can't have him.  
Hive in a tree.  
She can't have him until he opens her.  
Peony and ant.  
He opens her until she can't have him.  
Wind in grass.  
She can't have him while he opens her.  
Cloud and rain.  
He opens her, regretful she can't have him.  
Phrase and mockingbird.  
She can't have him regretful when he opens her.  
Root and weak branch.

## *Poem in Summer*

After the tension of heaven,  
it would feel good not to be overseen,  
to imagine the most beautiful heads of marigolds  
as minds flaunting an after-afterlife,  
temporary again, variant, physical, confined,  
unpicked. Imagine not being thought of,  
being without being seen: gold  
or less gold, yellow, orange-yellow, lemon,  
yellow-brown. But now the zinnias seem strangely  
badly dressed, and thinking so gives souls  
that have outreached us their way back.



*Confession 2.6.12*

In the extreme of soul's creation,  
what desire is absurd? If I am required  
to continue speaking to your back,  
I will speak to your back, for this also  
gives me shape as it gives my thinking shape,  
though it rounds my shoulders where  
the tendons hold the body to the head,  
and my head leans forward always  
in a shape not beautiful in women,  
while my eyes, fixed on your negligence,  
mark me as your theft, and must be beautiful  
if stolen. How did it begin to become good  
to go untouched, when seeing made the mind  
want what it loved without restraint,  
when my memory of being seen suggests  
I have been beautiful? If my beauty was invented  
and consumed by love, if I am shaped finally  
by love's abandonment, am I not shaped by love?

## *Personae Separatae*

If I keep running down the sand hills of Morocco, I will keep waking to the grainy constellations fallen out my ears on the pillow in the mornings afterward. Pristine, separate, separated, roseate, those particles first seemed to me my sleep. Also, truly, those words describe my ears, through which, into which, so much has passed since last we spoke, since you spoke to me. Although a face, as I've said many times, a face does not consist of namable elements, when I describe the tangerines sliced and dashed with cinnamon somehow patterned as a star, I know you think for a minute only of my mouth, or I hope you will, as when the professor brought along your drawings while vacationing in France and mailed one each week to your pallor at the hospital, you thought of his tongue bringing on the sealed envelopes. Thank you for writing that the mountain laurel there are having their own way. I remember further that those were your first drawings of your face, that you were shy and clumsy making them, but, delivered, they seemed a little beautiful to you. I write in that vein. I'm learning to become accustomed to the figs. The tea is good. In an empty beautiful hotel I was asked to choose among three dining rooms, the blue, the green, the red. I chose the red. The days are roseate, though now I miss a boy who passed me, walking, four days in a row. Night separates the days. The quiet starts to close the years. The quiet stars are close and separate as ears, mine from each other, mine from yours.

### *Confession 3.2.2*

In the dream, your body, having  
turned away, writes down the elegy.  
Its words are objects of your sense  
and I grow willing to be scraped being touched  
by them, though I desire first that words are made  
of fictions, as if the brown leaf is the false body  
of the green, or the green leaf  
the false body of the tree. How much more grief  
it is to think that words have souls, how much more  
pleasure to love them. If words  
have no souls, they would not be objects as they are,  
or objects of love. They are unsafe  
and slant and visible as any body interlocked,  
though your body remains turned, and you write  
my elegy, and my own mind made this  
in a dream. The reader is not called on  
to relieve, but if I relive grief inside a dream  
of words, why wake unable to remember them?

## *Self-Portrait as Landscape*

If two wild dogs come at her from the standing corn in March,  
the dead leaf sounds will come inside the quiet morning,  
simple as earliness inside a day. What the invisible holds,  
fog blurs. Still, reason's the horizon kept on the move by her desire,  
the mind's horizon linear, hilly, waving off in two directions,  
punched up from underneath, tacked down. There's water hanging in  
the air.

Then there's her fear: the rushing dogs, the day, her face.  
The rushing day, her face. The day a collapsible cup drunk from  
another way,  
instant and different where the air inverted shows itself inside the fog,  
where the day's sucked deeply inside its own smallest part,  
and the quiet never leaves the shaking leaf. *One summer he nearly drowned,*  
*a Cree poem goes, but he saw his face / a long time*  
*in that lake. / He learned his face then.*

The quiet never leaves the shaking leaf. That's good,  
because so much does leave. The unseen hawk whose shapes  
she'd have no answer for bounds off a tree. The dogs *make*  
*something* of her scent, then trot. The fog that held the distance off  
wears thin. An incommunicable blue breaks through. How odd she is,  
being here and happy.

## *Mountain Laurel*

The women were the room and the room was full,  
not of women but of cadences and bedclothes, cadences irregular  
and full, as drapery rounded by a recurrence of a wind  
or by sequential unrelated winds all of a night  
and of bedclothes, of nightgowns, white bedclothes gone blue,  
moved on by a wind, rumpled there by bodies, wind,  
and night in a long generation of arrivals of nighttime,  
and the nightgowns were long also, also repeated, also  
blue, and the bodies of the women of the room were loose  
and long and white where they had been assigned to sleep,  
but they are not sleeping, they will not sleep as they have been  
assigned, these several women from the South and elderly.

## *Amaranth*

Deer come to the porch  
and eat the portulaca. A thought of  
its fuchsia flowers being chewed  
is its own succulence. The next night  
they strip the yellow rose. When I was stupid,  
when I was sleeping, my own voice told me  
to look up *amaranth*. A small purple flower;  
also an imaginary flower that does not fade.  
What in the world did I think I was, believing  
I could move from one to another without death?

*Confession 4.13.20*

Tuesday, burning  
cedar. Wednesday, rain.  
Thursday, scent of either  
inside both. Dry hand  
the body had made wet.  
Do you see I look for nothing  
but indications of his love?  
Is it beautiful, one invisibility  
embedded in another, sailed  
by what, input exactly where?  
It attracts without being asked,  
though it has been assigned  
as I have been assigned, marked  
by being elsewhere earlier,  
and though now where  
it is redoubled, I am  
halved, the day houses it  
and my body houses it.

With movement. A figure moving over grass, a body  
moving on what will not move. Over green grass  
and among the trees. If a hill comes,  
not *if the body approaches a hill*, but, *if a hill comes*,  
something is ended.

He said the figure was the figure of a man.

Or, she said, is it in the grass, the still part, the true  
on which movement depends, the tree guiding by blocking  
the voluptuous body with voluptuousness of its own,  
another being physical in the extreme.

She said to be redeemed of this would mean being harmed.

Then he wanted and she wanted it in all places and as often  
as possible. In the motion of the figure voluptuous and  
restrained as well as in the thin full bodies making up  
the still body of the grass. In the hill that approaches and in  
the hill moved toward, even in the shapes not spoken of,  
the dead who once knew longing, surely,  
and still seem to when thought of.



## *Poem*

The white cat's neck is thicker in winter.  
It's winter now. Fear also can enlarge her  
but not this afternoon. I believe she'll sleep  
as I write this like she slept when I thought to write,  
when I wanted to pass something through my hand  
that would have otherwise remained ideal  
or come out my mouth if you were here  
or listening. Your mouth is beautiful especially  
as its expectation of loss collapses. You remember.  
My mouth also was opening.

*Confession 7.21.27*

Because I see the body of this death, your body,  
and know desire for you only through  
a remembering that is both intricately close  
and far away from me (bright wetness under eyelids  
and behind your open mouth), vivid only  
in past time, able to do nothing now,  
to do nothing more  
than be remembered or forgotten,  
I hate my will to place you as you are,  
undistorted, before me, because I see  
your face is nothing like a word  
made real by saying, or an object  
like the jessamine in rain, tragically  
holding itself open, or the rain itself,  
itself because it falls. Because I see  
that whosoever sees may not so grieve  
as if she had not received, I see the body  
of this death, my body, made of what it sees.

## *Her Sleep*

One can choose pallor over color at the onset  
of an abandonment like sleep. She's most herself  
to herself, she's wholly interior, the blank after saturation  
which was the moment of her feeling his look on her  
as she was falling there, where earlier  
he had approached so differently, and was  
so differently received. Where she is uncolored  
she is herself as much as her arm is, loose  
in the bedclothes among the lines making up her hair.  
She recedes in order to approach him in this next true way,  
as excess of line, as outline, but voiceless, colorless,  
shed into him the gold-green and gold-brown  
which is his watching her.

## *His Watching*

His relief at being entered exists in him first  
as sensation, though earlier he would have said  
he would prefer it coming as a good idea  
which could be said, and said to her. As it is,  
her silence added to his silence makes a corridor  
for her inpouring, and he feels tuggings all inside  
and leanings which depend on the extravagance  
of difference in the body supine on the bed  
and his body folded on the bedside chair.  
His look keeps ripe his part in the transparency  
unstretched by her sleep, where, without thinking  
and bodiless, he makes her brush by.

## *Confession 8.1.2*

If I love the dead too much, it's because I heard  
from the mouth of Truth there were those who had  
made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom  
of heaven. These were the mothers and fathers, O  
my God, these were the teachers also, proffering  
division in every discipline, on the time lines,  
the narrations, the boreal chorales, O the red never  
together with the lavender, my God, one language  
mundane, one for prayer *pater noster qui es in coelis*,  
the more partings the more incorruptible substance  
fast in the heart. But my fingers fastened and unfastened  
in the hair, at the wrists, high between the legs, or  
sometimes at the hard shoulders only with a daughter's love,  
and preferred the fastenings. Now that I am given back  
the bodies as parcels of ashes, I am come to love ash,  
seeing that the grasses never did look back at me,  
and the sky wants me small. I love the dead double,  
from my body, and because they divide from me.

## *Heav'n Hides Nothing from Thy View*

Will you know also to love me after ending  
when presence isn't completely absence yet?  
It might be a secrecy like air escaping backward  
from the toy or bed you have just blown up  
right before insertion of the stopper, something  
from your body rushing back to you,  
like thoughts of a room you just pull the door on  
finally and for the last time, where any action  
reeks with privacy, requiring nothing but one mind  
resisting mildness but ready to pretend  
that memory will do, leaving behind the exact mouth  
that surrounded you, and the mother as she recedes,  
and the body of the iris bud whose yellow tip  
makes you wild.

## *Taking Pleasure*

These new dead leaves are not gathering or resting,  
though I would wish it for them, under the evergreen.  
There was one thing stained by its reference to us:  
a handmade ghost, a decoration, small, tender,  
on the far side of the yard beside the hospice . . .

At which point the carver keeps chipping the flint  
past utility, making the weapon beautiful.

In the woods, a ruin, a foundation for a house. All around, the bodies  
of leaves turn in toward brittleness until the smallest paw  
can break them. Someone is walking there, near what was once an edge,  
to the apple tree split by the weight of another excellent  
unpicked crop. Shudder of presence seeding itself.  
Notes, then the bodies of birds punching through.

Who told you that you could eat  
that fruit? Why should joy  
depend on emptiness?

Scent of ripeness readying the mouth. Touch  
following the desire to touch. Before desire, fear of an untouched life.  
Before fear, understanding brittleness. Was that you,  
coaxed into hunger among the cracking leaves?

## *The Many Colors*

There is a clearing one hopes one is coming to  
magically and without accountability but with  
grave understanding any minute like a thing  
you could see by peeking out the glass in a door:  
the raccoon's foreleg moving from the shoulder  
slowly in a roundish fear-shape toward the cat-  
food bowl, or the adjacent hushed-up feeling of  
tenderness one feels flipping through the body  
when opening an antique book of photographs  
lovingly made of dead stranger children  
in a pretty library. They had turned his face  
in the direction of the open window he might have  
seemed to have suddenly become. The many colors  
every day do as much for us as they can.  
In the clear place we thought we were meant to be  
brought to but not today, a letter came. It said  
there was no such thing as mistaken happiness.



*Confession 8.9.21*

When an open mouth outweighs and outlasts  
words, I am a maze of wanderings,  
spent arguments, shrinkings. I willed myself  
to be made whole, and found will different  
from ability. Mind commands the body,  
and the body disobeys. Mind commands  
the mind and is repelled. Striated iris of the eye  
constricts as brightness leaves. Striated iris  
in the vase persists in opening. This would be God  
not giving me more than I can bear? I think of what  
eyes fear to see when held down pleasantly  
in sleep, I think of mouths stunned open,  
then stunned closed, and I think I would  
take heaven by force if, here, where  
the flower enters the mirror in the mind  
crying *brightness enter me again*, it would be denied  
as the soul is denied, by forgetting and remembering,  
by wavering, by not being spoken of at all.

## *Confession 13.9.10*

*Brightness enter me again, odd in proportion,  
black duck on brown water, a dark moving  
on an utmost heaviness, utmost and outermost  
fluttering the body of the inmost pond. Desire invents  
as loss invents, stationed in endings or beginnings,  
urged by their own weights to seek their places,  
and every body heavy. Can I become a girl again  
if I perceive myself a girl? If I was a child,  
I also was a darkness before that, relic I bear about me  
in my body, palpable now because of love, and because  
of loss of love. Brightness, be an instrument against  
the floral changes too slight in the mind, the feminine  
too attentive of being seen. Revisit the inmost  
shapes that opposites create by arcing toward, find  
the small place heavy with a prior deathlessness,  
an interior that skin can mark the outer boundary of.  
Enter me there, and inside there, where love  
remains unfixed and questions every answer.*



## Notes

The poems titled “Confession” derive language from the *Confessions of St. Augustine*, translated by E. B. Pusey. The numbers in the titles of these poems refer to passages from Pusey’s translation.

“Nude against the Light” is after a painting of the same name by Bonnard.

“Thimble Forest” and “Homage to the Romantic Ballet” are also titles of constructions by Joseph Cornell.

“Dyke Breach” is also the title of a painting by Karl Schmidt-Rottluff.

“Pietà” begins and ends with phrases from Julia Kristeva’s *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*.

“Confession 9.10.25” is for Daryl Lofdahl.

“Five-Part Question” has its form partly derived from the medieval Serbian poem “The Message of King Sakis and the Legend of the Twelve Dreams He Had in One Night.”

“Personae Separatae” is also the title of a poem by Eugenio Montale.

“Grace” is for Matthew Harvey.

The poems “Her Sleep” and “His Watching” are after Picasso’s *Meditation (Contemplation)*.



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# *The Oval Hour*

POEMS BY KATHLEEN PEIRCE

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